



---

The Mythos of Gumbo: Leon Forrest Talks about "Divine Days"

Author(s): Madhu Dubey and Leon Forrest

Source: *Callaloo*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Summer, 1996), pp. 588-602

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3298951>

Accessed: 12/06/2014 20:54

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*The Johns Hopkins University Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Callaloo*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

---

---

## THE MYTHOS OF GUMBO

### Leon Forrest Talks About *Divine Days*

by Madhu Dubey

*This interview was conducted at the Arts Club of Chicago in April 1994.*

**MADHU DUBEY:** Let's begin with the most immediately striking aspect of *Divine Days*—its length. Did you consciously set out to write a novel of epic scope, or did the novel expand as you were in the process of writing it?

**LEON FORREST:** Well, I certainly set out to write a novel of epic scope, but I didn't know it would have to be this long. Actually the comedy and humor kept me going, in terms of just interest, and I thought that since I was interested in it, maybe a readership would be interested in it as well.

**DUBEY:** Was there an initial conception or seed in your mind from which the novel took shape?

**FORREST:** Well, sure there was. One was that it would be over a seven-day period. I had been reading and rereading in recent times *Ulysses*, with the great power that book has over one day, so I thought that might be intriguing to try over seven days. Also the character of Sugar Groove was one that fascinated me throughout the course of the novel. And I would say Ford. And then I was quite fascinated later in the novel by the possibilities of the character Imani. It seems to me many major novels center on at least three major characters, so I was driven along by fascination with each of these characters, but each in a different way.

**DUBEY:** Did the novel change as you were writing it—your idea of what you wanted to achieve in it?

**FORREST:** No, it seemed to expand a lot. One of my concerns was to try to write a novel that would capture the complexity of African-American character, so that I wanted to see characters in sustained series of development. Well, you need a long novel to do that. But that's one of my criticisms of much of just modern fiction anyway, that you rarely get characters who are developed in depth.

**DUBEY:** Did you write the novel in a linear fashion, beginning with what is now the beginning of the novel, and going straight through until the end?

*Callaloo* 19.3 (1996) 588–602

---

---

## C A L L A L O O

---

---

**FORREST:** Oh no. One of the first scenes that I wrote would have been the one in the barbershop, when they're telling this long tall tale about Sugar Groove.

**DUBEY:** Throughout the novel, the narrator, Joubert Jones, who is himself an aspiring writer, remarks on the temptation of imposing a simplistic order on the chaos of experience. And clearly the structure of *Divine Days* resists that kind of temptation. Is it accurate to say that the structure of the novel is modeled on a jazz method of composition—a method which allows you to give shape to chaos without imposing a kind of reductive order on it?

**FORREST:** It is. Chaos is a great driving force in all life. It's a driving force in just the basic things of life, because when we get up in the morning we're faced with chaos . . . I guess though that for me the first connection with jazz is that I will take just a fragment of a story, or a fragment of a character, or a confrontation, and then build on it, build on it, riff on it like a jazz musician or a solo performer. So in fact a lot of scenes just start off with me working on a little riff, and then that develops into a scene. As far as the larger thing goes, I always try to orchestrate a scene so that it starts off in one way, gets involved with some other things, and then comes back to that—a little fugue-like method. But I'm always trying to both orchestrate a scene and orchestrate the novel really, as well as do those individual solos. And they're all through there—remember the long one with Beefeater, for instance, and the one we were talking about in the barbershop. And there are many others.

**DUBEY:** In fact, I think at one place in the novel you refer to a rambling method of storytelling as akin to riffing in a jazz piece.

**FORREST:** Yes, yes.

**DUBEY:** You use the phrase “mythos of gumbo” (287) in the novel, and taking it completely out of context, I read this phrase as a really eloquent description of what you achieve in the novel—the way that you manage this complex mix of languages and cultures without reaching for a kind of false or easy coherence.

**FORREST:** Well, thank you. You see, for me writing is one place where I can get leverage over all this chaos that appears so livid and volatile in my imagination, and I can't get it any other place. I can't get it in conversation . . . So also a way of dealing with my own loneliness, I guess, is to be able to find a place where I can bring all of this together, and create a certain mad world out of it.

**DUBEY:** It was clear to me from reading the novel that your understanding of African-American culture is strongly opposed to any kind of purist or singular conception of cultural identity, or even a bifocal conception. I'm thinking here of the various references in the novel to the DuBoisian notion of double-consciousness as confining, or even your satire on Fulton Armstead's double A. Could you elaborate on what precisely you find so confining about these?

---

---

## C A L L A L O O

---

---

**FORREST:** I resist anything in this culture that has to do with purity. That's so anti-American in the first place. And yet at the same time it's a crucible on which so much of race relations and white supremacy is based—the idea of purity. But there certainly aren't any pure Americans culturally, not at this time, that's one thing for sure. And obviously the heritage, the background of blacks is very complex, not just on color lines but lines of culture. Think about the blacks that are most admired—whether it be Ellington, or Lightnin Hopkins, or Mahalia, or Leontyne Price—these are people who are consequences of so many different cultural forms that influenced them, and out of that they fashioned something new. Armstrong maybe is the best example.

**DUBEY:** Do you find that taking this kind of position is unpopular these days?

**FORREST:** It's not so much a taking of a position. Rather, it's almost like a religious faith to me. But it's a faith that I've come to evolve into or have been converted into through my own experience in life.

**DUBEY:** What are some of the experiences that led you to believe this so strongly?

**FORREST:** Well, a good background in African-American music of all kinds, and certainly literature, a sense of the complexity of democracy, and the way in which other groups impact upon us. Many of the nationalists don't want to deal with that. And the best proof always is, of course—let a true African come into the room and you can see how American blacks are.

**DUBEY:** Why do you insist on using the term "Negro-American" in the novel? What does the term signify to you that "black American" or "African American" doesn't?

**FORREST:** I don't look at it as a bad word. I don't have a problem with any of those terms, although many of the characters in my novel would really have been—don't forget the novel is set in 1966—more what we would call traditional Negroes in the sense of being race men, race women. So that's part of it. But I don't have any problems with the terms "black" or . . .

**DUBEY:** What about your satirical play on the double A, for African American?

**FORREST:** Oh yeah. Well again, there's the setting, and there's a lot of satire in there. Actually, of course, Fulton is a very nice guy. He's like many people who are rather limited or bigoted on some things, but they can be very warm with certain groups within their tribe or tradition, even as they're exclusive to outsiders. So he represents some of that, but meanwhile if you remember in the novel he's made a fool of by many of the Africans who see how hung up he is.

**DUBEY:** I'm going to take another phrase from your novel out of context—"swirl of identities" (19)—which perfectly captures the way in which identity in *Divine Days* is

---

---

## C A L L A L O O

---

---

never unified or unitary, but is always a melange of other people's voices and languages. And throughout the novel, characters are obsessed and even possessed by other people's voices which force them to revise and expand their own sense of their identities.

**FORREST:** That's certainly true with Joubert. Of course that's so much a part of the vision of the novel—the transformation of the self constantly, impact of other cultures, other individuals, and so on, on the individual. In that sense, the characters are hopefully a little bit like Proteus in *The Odyssey*. Certainly Sugar Groove is that way.

**DUBEY:** And Ford, and so many others.

**FORREST:** The people who aren't are the ones who get in trouble, like Imani. I think that that's such a wonderful feature of black American life, this capacity for reinvention, of taking whatever it is and making something new out of it, constantly. You've got to do that if you're a jazz musician. You've got to do that if you're a preacher. You've got to do that if you're a gospel singer—make it new each night, make it different. And that in turn carries over to the whole quest for identity—to try to find out new ways of engaging oneself and transforming oneself and one's identity, given American society.

**DUBEY:** In the novel, you treat so many different facets of African-American culture with a kind of generous irony that celebrates at the same time as it debunks. And I found that the only group that you subject to merciless satire are the nationalists. I'm especially thinking of the character of Sambi! Are you unambivalently critical of black nationalist ideologies, or do you see any redeeming or necessary features in them?

**FORREST:** Well, I think there are a lot of redeeming qualities that maybe even Joubert doesn't see about someone like Fulton, even though he's made a fool of sometimes. He's very generous; he certainly is in the tradition of race men, trying to take care of the tribe. But he's lost the cutting edge which would let him see how people will take advantage of him. There's a wonderful generous spirit about him that I do admire in certain features of nationalism, the spirit of taking care of your own. But the point is that in this country there are so many other ways in which taking care of your own can be impacted upon by the outer culture that he's cut himself off from completely. I mean, he has a hell of a time that night when some whites take Felton home. He can't deal with that, you know. So I see him and Sambi! as quite different. Sambi! is more of a sinister and demonic trickster, and in that sense he's connected a little bit with Ford.

**DUBEY:** Yes. In your interview with Ken Warren, you said that you don't believe that the Black Aesthetic of the 1960s generated any significant artistic developments (403–4).

**FORREST:** Certainly not in the novel.

---

---

## C A L L A L O O

---

---

**DUBEY:** I just wanted to push you a little further on this. Do you think the cultural nationalists' emphasis on recovering black oral forms catalyzed the way in which so much subsequent black fiction experiments with oral forms? Or would you trace that back earlier, to, say, Ralph Ellison, or even the Harlem Renaissance?

**FORREST:** That's right. And Sterling Brown, and so on. I'm not a scholar of this, but I suppose that there was some residue that came off that was useful to many of the writers who emerged. I didn't need it, but maybe some of the younger people did. That may well be true. But ultimately the people who are successful who came out of that, let's say, like Alice Walker and later Toni, and many others—they've vaulted over so much of the narrows of the Black Aesthetic. The Black Aesthetic also on some levels was very chauvinistic, so many of the women who emerged in the 1970s had to vault over it for those reasons as well. But I didn't particularly need it, and it was never complicated enough for me. Again, my point initially was that there were many poets who came out of there, of dubious quality, or various qualities. Many of them haven't survived. But in terms of the novel, hardly any novelists that I can think of.

**DUBEY:** Did it even have a negative impact on your work during that period?

**FORREST:** Well, it had a negative impact in the sense that I felt that I wasn't going to be published by any of this crowd, which was true. They weren't interested in what I was saying. But I find that negative forces are oftentimes quite useful, quite useful. There's a little saying my mother used to have. It wasn't very profound, but she used to say, "Every knock is a boost." No, if anything, it sort of toughened my resolve. Because it wasn't a question of right or wrong, but it was rather that I knew there was a whole lot about black life out here that they had no sense of.

**DUBEY:** Do you feel that the cultural climate, especially in the universities, has changed substantially since the 1960s and 1970s?

**FORREST:** I don't know if it's improved for the better in some ways. It's certainly much more open to black writers and African-American culture and so on. But there's still a tendency to find a certain catalogue of heroines and heroes, and this means that other people who are very good and who don't tend to fall into a certain line are excluded or are undervalued. Or there's a tendency now, since so many black writers have emerged—not really a lot but seemingly a lot—to say, Oh, you're in so-and-so's school. You're in the Ellison school. Or you're in the Morrison school. Or you're in the . . . maybe Baraka school, if there's one. And meanwhile writers underneath a school or spell are very different. They'd say that, let's say, about Gayl Jones under Morrison, but her work is very different. My work is, I would hope, very different from Ellison's, though it's certainly benefited greatly by his impact.

**DUBEY:** In a recent interview-essay on Ralph Ellison in *The New Yorker*, David Remnick claims that Ellison's three books, the novel and the two collections of essays,

---

---

## C A L L A L O O

---

---

"are the texts for a loose coalition of black American intellectuals who represent an integrationist vision of the country's history and culture," and among these intellectuals, Remnick names you, along with Wideman and Charles Johnson (35). I have two questions about this. First, do you find it accurate to say that Ellison's works generated a group of black authors who represent an integrationist vision? And, secondly, if you were to place yourself in a loose coalition of authors, which ones would you select? Would it be Ellison and Wideman and Johnson, or would you place yourself in an entirely different set?

**FORREST:** No, I'd add some writers to that. I'd be very honored to be in that group; that's a very fine group of writers. Ultimately, though, what you would do would be to take certain books from each of those writers, rather than to say all of Gaines's work, or all of Forrest's. You might say, "Well, now *this* is of a certain level." And that's the bad thing about ever saying, "I like the work of this writer," because it means you like all of Hardy, or all of this one or that one, which you obviously do not necessarily do. Even Faulkner, my goodness, he's so uneven, you know. The other thing is that the statement is alright for a magazine article because it's got to constantly distill things. But I never felt any sort of constitution that was set forth by Ellison that I had to follow at all. I benefited greatly by his experience and learned a great many things from him, but my work is very different in other ways. I'm much more interested in problems of families, religion—these two issues alone are issues that Ellison doesn't deal with a lot, at least in the published work. So even as I salute so much of what he's done and his example, I also, if I'm worth anything, want to say, "Yes, but this is my church over here, and this is his church, and then this is another person's church." And the singing is different, the preaching is different, even though we're all Baptists, let's say.

**DUBEY:** What are some of the ways that Ellison's writing has influenced not just your writing but also the last few generations of black writers?

**FORREST:** Again, I would say this whole idea of transformation of oral eloquence into literary eloquence. That's been an impact that he's had on a great many writers in various ways. It's not so much to say that he was the only writer who was doing that, but he seemed to be the one who was most successful in doing that, in fiction. Baldwin was doing that in the essay form . . .

**DUBEY:** And there was Zora Neale Hurston . . .

**FORREST:** Well, the problem would have been that a lot of people of my generation probably wouldn't have read Hurston the way we would have read Ellison in college.

**DUBEY:** Simply because her books weren't available?

**FORREST:** That's right. Another thing is, it really does help a writer if someone else's work is celebrated, so that you say, "Oh yes, this is someone who must be taken

---

---

## C A L L A L O

---

---

seriously, and here's all this body of criticism behind it." So you really want to tip your hat to, let's say, Alice Walker, who discovered Hurston on her own and saw the strengths there.

**DUBEY:** A lot of the recent criticism on African-American fiction focuses on the distinctive ways in which this fiction draws on oral forms. In *Divine Days*, for example, you evoke a wide variety of these forms, including blues, jazz, storytelling, sermons, and so on. Yet clearly you're not a musician or a preacher or a storyteller, but you're a novelist. Often this crucial distinction between an oral artist and a novelist tends to get blurred in the criticism. In what ways do you think that your work as a novelist both overlaps with and differs from an oral performance?

**FORREST:** Well, ultimately, I want to be judged as a novelist and not an oral artist. And in that sense I would diverge somewhat at least from Morrison's public statements about that. Ultimately I want to weigh on the eloquence of the written heritage that has the complexity of scripture to it. I'm much more influenced by other writers in that sense, but at the same time I want to keep alive that grain, that personality, that ethos that is so African-American. The jazz musicians are very helpful for that because I can hear all kinds of cries and groans and screeches of various kinds in the solo of an alto saxophonist, let us say, that I can identify with certain street cries and so on. But at the same time there's a certain lyricism there that is the lyricism of a surging songster that can only be done through the refinement of art by the musician. And just as that street cry that it may be based on is a long way from the eloquence of what you'd hear in, let's say, Ellington's band, the imagination allows us to connect both.

**DUBEY:** You're clearly not interested in merely reproducing or transcribing oral forms. Could you say something about the process of refinement, as you call it, by which you transform oral forms into fiction?

**FORREST:** Well, I get it through tradition, but I also get it through just the hard work of rewriting over and over again.

**DUBEY:** Do you read aloud to yourself sometimes?

**FORREST:** Yes, I do. Although ultimately I've got to mistrust as well as trust the ear because reading, as we know, is done in silence. And even as we encourage our students to read aloud, ultimately reading is done in solitude, just as writing is done in solitude. And you are thinking and meditating and reflecting as you're reading. So even if in class we have someone read aloud, we've got to stop that after a while because you get hypnotized by the prose of this writer or that writer and then you say, well, now let's go back and investigate what he or she is doing. It is a reflective art in that sense, but it comes through rewriting endlessly, putting it away and coming back to it, and cutting out what might well be the fat of it or also perhaps certain things that

---

---

## C A L L A L O O

---

---

are too pedestrian in the writing. And I think also what's important is training your ear at an early age on a variety of rhetorical sounds—being open to that, being a good listener. Then I think too being willing to allow characters to speak with many voices. People speak with many voices, and those many voices suggest to me a layered consciousness.

**DUBEY:** You referred a moment ago to Toni Morrison's statements about what she calls the tribal artist or the village artist. In one of her essays, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," she writes that the novelist is needed urgently now in the African-American community, to fill the place or to serve the same kinds of functions as were served by the tribal artist in the past (340–41). Is it even possible for the contemporary novelist to replace the oral performer? Aren't the audiences for these two kinds of artists vastly different?

**FORREST:** I think so. What she wants to do, and it's understandable, is to get some kind of connection really, to open up things for the writer. And she can do this, because Morrison can have a house full of people who will listen to her in the way a tribal artist was listened to at one time, or a griot. That's a great power that she has and it's hard to think of any other American writer, black or white, who has that kind of power with an audience. And this is an old thing. You remember in the 1960s maybe and a little later too, when the poets would go around to cabarets and so on and read their poetry aloud, to try to bridge the gap between these worlds. It's all quite commendable, but for me anyway, it's a different tradition. They have connections, and the connection is the imagination. As you were saying, people were listening the other night to what I was reading and found music in it . . . But it would be only in thinking about it in a mood that's quite reflective that they'd say, "I think this is what it's about." What they were doing was hearing echoes of the tradition, but they weren't necessarily seeing where it was taking them imaginatively. I guess also you'd have to say that even though Toni says these things, her work is fascinating through the imagination, through fantasy.

**DUBEY:** Also, the kind of audience that reads Toni Morrison's work or your work is very different from the kind of audience that she has in mind or anyone has in mind when they speak of tribal art.

**FORREST:** That's right. And there is a danger, of course. No matter whatever else we say, we're not finally preachers, really.

**DUBEY:** Do you have an ideal audience in mind when you write?

**FORREST:** I don't. I just think of probably people who would want to approach literature the way I like to approach it, as an art of infinite resonance, that you can go back to again and again, and get nourishment and intellectual stimulation and fun, and all the things you need to live.

---

---

## C A L L A L O O

---

---

**DUBEY:** So you don't write for any particular group, let's say, for example, black readers or literary critics?

**FORREST:** No, no, no! Male, female, black, white . . . Maybe if I had the good sense to do that, I would sell more.

**DUBEY:** While reading *Divine Days*, I was constantly struck by the very non-purist ways in which oral and folk forms appear in the novel. Throughout, oral and literary influences, high culture and popular culture, all interact in often really startling ways. For example, Cinderella, a girl from the West-side projects, writes Shakespearean sonnets, and Joubert quotes Joyce to Williemain the barber. Is there a utopian impulse behind your creation of these fluent dialogues between different sections of the black community? Does it project a way of overcoming potentially divisive class and educational differences within the community?

**FORREST:** Well, no, it's really there. Don't forget, with Cinderella, that's one of the last things we find out about her and there are a lot of other things that are more dominant about her—being lost, a little waif, and so on. And really, if you think about it, in a city like Chicago, for years you had the influence of Gwendolyn Brooks with this contest, and Brooks herself, of course. Many of these poems of hers were based on a kind of pure form and it's not unusual that a teacher would help a child who is wayward and lost in every other way. I was trying to write against this idea of a child who's totally a victim, although she's certainly a victim in many ways. And of course for a long time she can hardly talk and then when she gets in the cab, she just can't stop. So she herself is full of contradictions, and obviously I'm writing this against images like Bigger or maybe even Pecola. Not to say they're wrong at all, because we get more and more the sense that Wright was really on to something about Bigger. But there are some other sides to characters who come from this situation that are rarely conveyed to us in terms of literature.

**DUBEY:** Another striking example of what one can call a gumbo method of mixing cultural forms in the novel is the character of Sugar Groove, whose cultural ancestry includes Oedipus, Icarus, the black folk figures of the trickster and the badman, and even the legendary flying African. Early on in the novel, each time I came across Sugar Groove's character, it recalled Luzana Cholly from Albert Murray's *Train Whistle Guitar*. But later I found that despite all the parallels, there are clear differences, because Luzana Cholly is a pure folk type while Sugar Groove's character stretches the bounds of folk heroism—for example, he's college educated, and he's highly literate. Could you talk a little about the ways in which you reinvent the folk figure of the badman, with specific reference to Sugar Groove?

**FORREST:** I'm glad you mentioned Luzana Cholly. I hadn't thought about it in a while, but I certainly at one time was teaching that book regularly and found him a fascinating character. That's the first time anyone has mentioned that. Again, you're

---

---

## C A L L A L O O

---

---

writing against figures you admire in literature and in life, so I didn't want to repeat that figure, and I wanted to create someone who had this range of complexity. Certainly, there are a lot of things about Sugar Groove that are symbolic of a certain generation of African-American hustler, and drifter, and a man who collected everything along the way. And it turns out he's also quite a generous man and apparently goes through this spiritual turning late in his life. I would always see people somewhat like this who would go through some late spiritual transformation or had a certain kind of inwardness. But because on the surface there was such a bravado about their lives—women, drink, and gambling—people would miss this interior loneliness, or this interior cry of the soul. So I wanted to explore that. Like Sugar Groove, these were people who would disappear for a long time and come back with their travels and what they had done. That disappearing and coming back was part of the legendary quality of these figures. But these are personality attributes within the community that are just waiting out there for some artist to come and seize and give a shape to. You're not sure about it, but there are some things you've seen at times—they may be good, they may be bad, they may be a mix of both—but they need to be addressed. I felt that certainly with the history of itinerant jazz musicians, blues singers, drifters, people who wandered around the city and so on—Sugar Groove was in that tradition as well as having some formal education.

**DUBEY:** Another sense in which Sugar Groove's character seems to revise the type of the badman is in his relationships with women. In so much of the fiction of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, you get a critique of the badman because of his irresponsibility and his often damaging effects on women. As far as Sugar Groove is concerned, did you consciously set out to redeem that aspect of the outlaw or badman figure?

**FORREST:** Well, I wanted to make it a little bit more complicated because, don't forget, he does stop seeing his daughter, even though he sends money regularly, and I think that's something to be criticized about him, even though he's still in search for her.

**DUBEY:** Yet at the same time he acts in a very responsible way toward Imani.

**FORREST:** Yes. She comes on and . . .

**DUBEY:** Very uncharacteristic of that type of . . .

**FORREST:** Here again I don't like the word "type" perhaps when I come to my main characters. I might have some types who are very minor. But certainly there's no type with him though you do see some traditions that he comes out of. And then you remember there's this whole scene when Sweetie tells him, "don't use this as an excuse for not seeing your daughter." She tells him off, you know.

**DUBEY:** It's not just in relation to women but even in his relationship with Joubert

---

---

## C A L L A L O O

---

---

that Sugar Groove emerges as a deeply responsible and even a spiritually redemptive figure. In your interview with Ken Warren, you said that “the trickster is the one who is not an agent of healing” (395). I wondered about that, because isn’t Sugar Groove a trickster who’s also a healer? I’m thinking particularly of the episode with Tilly Taylor, when he disguises himself as a gypsy fortune-teller in order to perform his good works.

**FORREST:** See, that’s why I wouldn’t say that he was a badman so much, but more of a kind of hipster, hipster-trickster as angel. I don’t see him in the tradition of the badman. I see him more as a drifter who’s searching for his identity but continues to search. That goes back to your earlier question, the idea that the search is constant. And never to think that if I settle upon this, this, and this, that’ll do it. In fact, you remember he breaks with the Civil Rights movement because that wouldn’t deal enough with the violence in him. So he’s ultimately back to that relationship to some spiritual force within human nature.

**DUBEY:** Do you see any kind of relationship between the trickster as healer and the trickster as demon? Both Sugar Groove and Ford are trickster figures.

**FORREST:** Of course, Ford is a trickster as demon, diabolical and so on. Here we might think about when Wilkerson talks about the difference between some of the African and African-American tricksters. And Sugar Groove veers on this idea of using his devices, his tricks, for healing, bringing people together. But don’t forget, he does this in a way that is selfish, in the sense that he can hardly remember these people’s names, you know, and he gives them names. The novel is filled with all sorts of tricksters, and one of the problems with Imani is that she doesn’t have enough of that in her personality, and so she’s constantly being set up by people. And to some degree—this gets us back to Ford—it’s necessary to have some of that in the base of human personality, and yet not to go to the point of Ford, who is so base and so treacherous, and yet comic, I hope, in a certain way, too. So Sugar Groove would represent in many ways, not all ways, the trickster as healer. He’s always trying to bring things together, bring people together, even though some tricks were often played by him in the South, you remember, with his father and so on. So he represents a certain magical force, a trying to bring order out of chaos. Ford is on the other end of the spectrum, someone who delights in chaos. There may be a connection here between Ford and Rinehart in *Invisible Man*, who feeds on chaos. And of course chaos destroys the so-attractive Tod Clifton . . . I thought it was important too that the last part of Sugar Groove’s life in the novel revealed that he’s really trying to come together with his spiritual force.

**DUBEY:** Yes, I kept thinking of the two characters together—Sugar Groove and Ford—because of the ambiguity of the title itself. On the one hand Joubert has written a play called *Divine Days* about Ford. Yet at the start of the novel, he says he’d like to write a play about the “divine days” of Sugar Groove. That double reference kept

---

---

## C A L L A L O O

---

---

making me think of the ways in which the two characters are so close to and yet distinct from each other.

**FORREST:** Oh, sure. And there's a certain energy that Ford has that may be the energy that drives the world, before we refine it to some levels, like a Sugar Groove; and even there, Sugar Groove himself is a man who is always in search of his identity, and seemingly by the time he was seventy he had finally embraced it.

**DUBEY:** Would you agree that Joubert's greatest artistic rival in the novel is Ford, who is described as the ultimate playwright?

**FORREST:** That's true, but he's also Sugar Groove's greatest rival for the attention, I would think, of the reader.

**DUBEY:** As a portrait of the artist as a young man, *Divine Days* presents a model of the relationship between the artist and tradition which recalls Ellison's famous remarks on the relation between each individual jazz musician and the prior tradition. Could you say something about that?

**FORREST:** There are two scenes that we could focus on in which you have this "antagonistic cooperation"—this is Ellison's term and he sort of did an improvisation of Eliot, I guess. One is the scene between Joubert and Reverend Roper. In this scene, Reverend Roper attempts to make something of a conversion of Joubert, but he feels that, to bring him to the other side, he must meet him on the grounds of the secular. And then they go back and forth like two jazz musicians trying to outblow each other or duel each other. Ultimately it would appear that this is what Ellison was talking about—there's a lot of fun between the two men as they try to outdo each other in storytelling and these storytelling riffs are really like aspects of jazz. And the other scene that comes to mind is in the barbershop between Williemain and Joubert in which they're arguing over, debating, in some cases supplanting knowledge that the other has, in some cases agreeing, and that is connected to what happens in oral tradition between a speaker and a congregation. And ultimately the reader will want to decide how these two set pieces, between Roper and Joubert, and between Joubert and Williemain, are similar and yet different. Those are two different jazz sets, you see.

**DUBEY:** Could your own relationship with literary figures whom you've admired also be described as an "antagonistic cooperation"?

**FORREST:** Consciously and unconsciously, yes. And that would certainly be true, as you called to mind—I'd even forgotten about this—with the whole character of Luzana Cholly of Murray's. It probably did influence my writing of Sugar Groove. And that has to do with the fact that many writers identify a certain kind of figure within the culture, and then each spends a lifetime giving particular shape to him or her.

---

---

## C A L L A L O O

---

---

**DUBEY:** One African-American novelist that I don't hear you talk much about is Richard Wright, and considering that you both write about Chicago, what is it about his work that you find doesn't engage you as, say, Ellison's or Murray's does?

**FORREST:** I'm engaged by Wright in teaching him but less engaged by him in terms of influence. The other thing is, and I was talking to you a little bit about this with Hemingway, that a lot of times a writer can free you to do certain things. A lot of things Wright dealt with in Chicago with Bigger have freed me to go on and do something completely different, and something I'm more familiar with about Chicago.

**DUBEY:** Would you elaborate on that?

**FORREST:** Well, I wouldn't want to create another Bigger, even though I admired what he did with Bigger. And seemingly, given all the lost young males in the slums and so on, he was really on to something about the importance of Bigger. But I wouldn't want to do that. I would want to get involved with characters who are much more complicated. Wright could never have created a character like Aunt Eloise, for instance. Wright rarely creates any really memorable dimensional women. And I'm extremely drawn to the complexity of female characters in all of my novels, and in my private life. And then Wright's own background, from Mississippi, was so hard, and my life has been very different. But there are certain things that he does—for instance, "Fire and Cloud" is just an amazing story, and I go back to that. But I guess since he was dealing with certain harsh realities of black life, in the South and in the North, it allowed me then to think about how I can get in-depth characterization. I think this is just a normal thing that a writer does—whether you admire a writer a lot or are influenced by him or not, you want to make sure you're cutting your own little path, your own little postage stamp.

**DUBEY:** Talking about complex female characters: in conversation the other day, you mentioned that you weren't completely happy with the way you had treated the character of Imani in *Divine Days*. What was it that you wanted to do with her character, but felt that you didn't?

**FORREST:** There are things I would have liked to have gone into about her, and I may well do that in the next novel. But that's a problem of writing a novel—maybe that's one reason why people work on a book for so long—because there are constantly new questions asked. I feel pretty complete about the other characters, but there is a heartbreak and a humanity that I wanted to get at with her, and I don't know that I've been able to get at all the depths of her personality.

**DUBEY:** Is there anything else that you feel you didn't manage to do in *Divine Days* as you wished to?

**FORREST:** There probably will be things as I read it over again over a period of time.

---

---

## C A L L A L O O

---

---

A friend of mine I won't name had said that he thought—I'm giving a part of it away already—that I might have muted the section on Beefeater, that it was too long. He was comparing it with other sections that he found had such power but that seemed to be too diffuse, I guess.

**DUBEY:** So you don't feel that this novel is completed or over with? Do you still think of going back and editing?

**FORREST:** Oh no, I won't touch it now. You have to draw the line eventually and say, "This is it." I certainly wouldn't edit anything. Even though I respect this person's criticism, I'm too bull-headed to ever go back and change anything. Then also I want to move on to something else. But Imani may well be one of the characters who may grow within me. That's the other thing, you never know who may grow within you. I'd like to do some more things with Sugar Groove, but as of this moment I don't know what.

**DUBEY:** The new novel you're working on, is it haunted by *Divine Days*?

**FORREST:** Well, yes, it is, because *Divine Days* is such a mighty work, mighty in terms of my own imagination. So I've got at least three problems. One, to rewrite it, to write a better novel—not a longer one, but a better one. Also to find something in my cranium where it's not dominating.

**DUBEY:** Is it dominating your writing these days?

**FORREST:** Yes, it's still a very dominating force, as you might imagine, with 1829 pages and seven years in the writing. I don't know how much I've recouped. . . . It's almost like being in love with someone and then you break off with them. You've been going with them or married to them seven years. That's a good time, seven years—the seven-year itch. And then you leave and break away from them, but you can't ever get that man or that woman out of your mind.

**DUBEY:** Do you want to say something about the new novel that you're working on, or is it too early?

**FORREST:** No, it's alright. I don't have any problems with that at all. It'll be about six or seven novellas, and they all make up a novel. And it won't be in the first person; it'll be omniscient. Some of it picks up material from *Divine Days*, and then other stuff is completely new. I have a few tricksters in there though.

**DUBEY:** Is this going to be another seven years?

**FORREST:** I don't know. I hope not. I don't think so. With my health, I don't even know if I have seven years. No, it won't be as long. It'll probably be, say, seven or

---

---

## C A L L A L O O

---

---

eight-hundred manuscript pages. Six or seven novellas. I've already written two of them. And there are some characters from my other novels that'll be in there. I don't know if you remember a woman by the name of Lucasta Jones. She's in there, she has a large role in there, and I'm finding I'm more and more engaged by her character. Joubert is in there, Aunt Eloise, and there are some completely new characters, one or two poets, and so on.

### WORKS CITED

- Forrest, Leon. *Divine Days*. Chicago: Another Chicago Press, 1992.  
Morrison, Toni. "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." *Black Women Novelists (1950–1980)*. Ed. Mari Evans. New York: Doubleday, 1984.  
Remnick, David. "Visible Man." *The New Yorker* (March 14, 1994).  
Warren, Kenneth W. "The Mythic City: An Interview with Leon Forrest." *Callaloo* 16.2 (1993).